

Metamorphosis Towards Human-Vegetal Hybrids, From Utopia to Dystopia and Back: A Mirrored Reading of Franci Conforti's *Carnivori* and Clelia Farris's *I vegumani*

Amélie Aubert-Noël
Université de Lille, France
amelie.aubertnoel@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article proposes a compared reading of two contemporary Italian novels: *Carnivori*, by Franci Conforti, and *I vegumani*, by Clelia Farris. Both stories revolve around the common premise of hybridizing humans with plants, aiming to address contemporary urgencies such as climate change and food security. Despite significant common points, the two novels diverge in their narrative trajectories: the former starts from a partially utopian situation and ends on a dystopian and even apocalyptic note, whereas the latter follows an exactly opposite path. This article explores the factors that may explain this difference, including the science fiction subgenres the novels are related to, the relevance of plants in the stories, and the ways hybridization is represented (as a loss of humanity and involution towards monstrosity versus as a vital enrichment of the characters' identities and way of life). As I will argue, the different approaches of the two authors may be traced back to the opposite ideological stances they take regarding a traditional, humanist view of human identity: adhering to it (*Carnivori*) or overcoming it in favour of a post-anthropocentric perspective (*I vegumani*).

Keywords: Climate fiction, dystopia/utopia, hybridization, Italian literature, plants.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura comparada de dos novelas italianas contemporáneas: *Carnivori*, de Franci Conforti, e *I vegumani*, de Clelia Farris. Ambas historias giran en torno a la premisa común de un plan para hibridar a los seres humanos con plantas, con el fin de afrontar urgencias contemporáneas como el cambio climático y la seguridad alimentaria. A pesar de presentar puntos de contacto significativos, las dos novelas divergen en sus trayectorias narrativas: la primera parte de una situación parcialmente utópica y culmina en una nota distópica e incluso apocalíptica, mientras que la segunda sigue un camino exactamente opuesto. Este artículo explora los factores que pueden explicar esta diferencia, incluyendo los subgéneros de ciencia ficción con los que las novelas se relacionan, la relevancia de las plantas en las tramas, y las formas en que se representa la hibridación (ya sea como una pérdida de humanidad y una involución hacia la monstruosidad, o bien como un enriquecimiento vital de la identidad y el modo de vida de los personajes). En última instancia, sostengo que los distintos enfoques de los dos autores pueden remontarse a las posturas ideológicas opuestas que adoptan respecto a una visión tradicional y humanista de la identidad humana: su adhesión (*Carnivori*) o su superación en favor de una perspectiva postantropocéntrica (*I vegumani*).

Palabras clave: Ficción climática, distopía/utopía, hibridación, literatura italiana, plantas.

Contemporary dystopian climate fiction works frequently revolve around the idea of a world devastated by endless drought (Arpaia, Conti, Pincio, Zanotti). Few works, however, try to imagine an alternative future, in which the sun's light and warmth may become increasingly vital sources of energy, if not the exclusive sources of food, for humanity. This paper aims to explore, through a comparative reading, two Italian novels that take this unusual approach: *Carnivori* by Franci Conforti (2017), and *I vegumani* by Clelia Farris (2022). Both works engage with the notion of scientific manipulations that transform human beings into hybrid creatures, able to derive new benefits from the sun, either by feeding on its rays or "simply" receiving vital energy from them.

In *Carnivori*, set in the late twenty-second century, the planet initially appears stable thanks to a synthetic superfood called "mulk," that has replaced every natural source of food and thus eradicated famine. Beneath this apparent balance, however, a secret faction of "ethical" scientists plans to release lab-created spores designed to transform humans into "sunmen" who survive on sunlight alone but gradually lose reason, social bonds, and even life itself—forcing the last survivors to consider exile on another planet.

I vegumani is set on a drought-stricken island where the local cooperative community faces the prospect of mass migration to the "North." When a locally produced sun lotion unexpectedly turns its users into human-plant hybrids resilient to heat and scarcity, the transformation offers a path to staying and thriving.

Despite sharing a premise of human-vegetal hybridization aimed to address an ecological crisis, the novels follow opposite narrative trajectories: *Carnivori* moves from a fragile utopia to apocalypse, whereas *I vegumani* charts a shift from dystopian hardship to a renewed harmony. Thus, this paper aims to analyse both the similarities and the divergences between the two novels, suggesting possible explanations for the variations in their treatment of shared themes. The analysis is grounded in the hypothesis that these differences may stem from distinct narrative intentions, divergent science fiction subgenres, and differing ideological premises. Ultimately, I will show that the same motif can serve very different purposes: in *I vegumani*, it opens the way to a post-anthropocentric reflection on human identity and evolution, as deeply connected to nonhuman others; in *Carnivori*, on the contrary, it reinforces a traditional humanist perspective, where transformation and otherness are seen as threats to human identity.

Issues of Plot and Genre: Common Motifs, Divergent Trajectories

This section aims to outline some structural and thematic characteristics of the novels under analysis, offering the reader elements that will facilitate engagement with the more conceptual developments in the subsequent sections.

Plots, Conflicts, and Protagonists

The two novels' main characters share some striking similarities, being both women characterized by an advanced scientific knowledge and a profound love for the natural world. *Carnivori's* protagonist, named John Smith, is American. *I vegumani's* main character, on the other hand, calls herself Gazania, after the name of a plant, and has a strong attachment to the unidentified island (probably Sardinia) where she has spent her whole life. The reader is never provided with any precise geographical coordinates, other than "il Nord," a faraway, vague place where most of the Southern populations have emigrated to find more liveable climatic conditions.

Both characters, because of their biological and chemical knowledge, find themselves involved in other people's plans to trigger an "evolution" of human beings towards human-plant hybrids. The main difference in this respect lies in their respective reactions when these plans are revealed—reactions that are hardly dissociable from the long-term objectives of the plans in question.

Carnivori's story is divided into three main parts. The first one (7-64) shows John Smith being recruited to participate in a military investigation on the possible existence of extraterrestrial interferences across the globe. In the second part (65-148), she and her colleagues infiltrate a scientific site, identified as being at the core of the extraterrestrial "traces," discover the secret plan, and fail to prevent its implementation. Conforti attributes the origin of the conspiracy to a group of scientists closely linked to the so-called "ethical" ("etici"), a worldwide faction which holds all life (even vegetal) as sacred and aims at stopping any consumption of animal or vegetal food by humanity. These so-called "ethical" do not hesitate to impose their radical 'solution' upon the whole humanity, as well as on all other species living on Earth, at the cost of a tragically high rate of death among the beings affected. Whether they die or transform into hybrids, the creatures exposed to the spores endure a painful agony: "The face swells up and becomes a monster of pain. [...] It's not a pretty sight. Mrs. Pivot dies shortly after, scratching her eyes out with her well-manicured nails; the others run back and forth [...] like crazy wasps" (185).¹

As a result, it is not surprising that, in the last part of the book (149-204), John Smith decides to be on the side of those resisting this forced 'evolution,' looking for a place where to hide with hundreds of survivors. They organize a new collective life underground, waiting for a possible moment when it will become possible to inhabit the earth *as human beings* again, or, in alternative, to exile themselves on another planet. The latter option becomes reality at the end of the novel, with the non-disinterested help of an extraterrestrial, intelligent species.

¹ "La faccia si gonfia e diventa un mostro di dolore. [...] Non è una bella scena. La signora Pivot muore poco dopo scorticandosi gli occhi con le unghie ben curate; gli altri corrono avanti e indietro [...] come vespe impazzite." All translations are mine.

The theme of exile is also central to the construction of *I vegumani's* story, although its connections with human evolution are opposite to those observed in *Carnivori*. Farris's novel can, like Conforti's, be divided into three main sections. The first one (5-47) is dedicated to presenting the setting and the issues related to climate change; the reader also gradually discover the surprising side effects of the sun cream produced by Gazania. The second section (48-100) narrates the failed attempts of a group of geoengineers from the North to induce rain, and the subsequent discussions among the members of the cooperative about the necessity to leave the island. In the final section (101-148) Gazania, discovers that the hybridization of humans with plants has been provoked by one of her fellow citizens archetypically called "the Grandma" ("la Nonna"), who had surreptitiously interfered with the fabrication of the sun cream. Her intent was to help the island's inhabitants better resist the climatic hardships—and, consequently, *prevent* exile. Once she finally knows the secret ingredient (derived from a genetically modified *Chrysomallon* snail), Gazania decides to accept her own responsibility in orienting humanity towards radical changes and starts producing the cream (renamed *AmicaSole*— "*FriendSun*") at an industrial scale.

As we will see now, the dialectic of common points and differences in the novels' plots is closely connected to their complex relationships with different literary genres and subgenres.

Apocalyptic versus Utopian Futures

Both novels belong to the "cultural field" of speculative fiction, understood here as a broad category including all literary and artistic "non-mimetic genres"—that is, genres that "are informed by the [...] departure from verisimilitude to consensus reality" (Oziewicz). This notion, "an indispensable term for contemporary works within the fantastic field, most of which blend genres to such a degree that they can no longer be adequately described with old tools and categorizations," may best frame a comparison of *I vegumani* and *Carnivori*. Indeed, both novels attempt to imagine a more or less plausible future through an original blending of different genres.

They share some characteristics with science fiction, particularly if the genre is considered more for its cognitive functioning than its thematic components. For example, Vint defines it as follows:

Sf forces us to confront ideas and conventions that have been *made to appear* natural and inevitable, by giving us a world founded on other premises. The dialectical interaction between what is familiar and what is alien thus opens up a more critical understanding of the structures underlying and shaping the familiar world of daily experience. This [...] is the source of the genre's ability to be a reflection *on* reality as well as *of* it. (39; emphasis in original)

However, they differ in their adherence to some of the genre's conventions, which usually involve a strong presence of scientific and technological advances—often constituting most of the *novum*, or new feature specific to an invented universe.²

Carnivori may be defined as a blend of elements from different genres, primarily thriller, science fiction, and apocalyptic fiction. Set in a future yet purely earthly world, it eventually reveals the existence of two extraterrestrial, intelligent species. One major modification in the global order constitutes the novel's *novum*: the worldwide diffusion of the aforementioned synthetic superfood called *mulk*. This has replaced most other food sources, especially meat, now viewed as a cruel, "involted" practice. Another *novum* is represented by a technological—and paradigmatically science fictional—novelty, called "liar," a personal and portable virtual interface which is completely integrated into the everyday lives of almost every human individual on the planet.

The planetary scale of the story, as well as its apocalyptic character, is announced from the first page, through a prolepsis presenting the outcome of the facts the reader is about to discover: "The United States no longer exist. [...] We will no longer eat this planet. I participated in the extinction. I know a fragment of the story, I was part of it" (7).³ The genre expectations are explicitly set through this *incipit*; therefore, the suspense, for the reader, is not about knowing whether human civilization will survive or not, but about the path that is going to lead to its destruction.

Conversely, Farris confines her story to a local scale. The contrast between the two texts is particularly striking if one compares the itineraries of the two main characters. Indeed, while John Smith first travels from the United States to Italy, and then to a research centre located somewhere near the Himalayas, Gazania never goes more than a few miles away from the place where she grew up. Furthermore, very little information is provided about the global situation: that climate change has rendered a large part of the planet almost unliveable, causing mass emigration to the "North," but no country names or geopolitical details are ever mentioned. This might suggest that the novel's focus is not on the globalized world, but on the local scale and, more precisely, on the fate of characters living in a new form of social and economic organization—namely, an agricultural cooperative that Gazania helped found.⁴

At the same time, the lack of precise geographical or temporal coordinates—although some features of the island have led critics to identify it as a transfigured Sardinia—also suggests the story is set in a *non-place* (Augé), as are many fictional environments built to display utopia. Indeed, utopia is one of the literary genres to

² This notion is fundamental to Darko Suvin's seminal theory of science fiction as mainly characterized by the centrality of "cognitive estrangement" ("On the Poetics").

³ "Gli Stati Uniti non esistono più. [...] Non ci mangeremo più questo pianeta. Ho partecipato all'estinzione. Conosco un frammento della storia, ne ho fatto parte."

⁴ In this sense, *I vegumani* is quite far from the science fiction canon, which puts at the centre of the stories the progressive discovery (for the reader and/or the protagonist) of the "xeno-encyclopedia," a term coined by Richard Saint-Gelais to indicate the complex of elements that constitute an invented universe.

which *I vegumani* can most adequately be associated. Interestingly, the novel appears to combine elements of the two contrasting meanings of utopia as theorized by Jameson: utopia as a “programme” or a literary genre, characterized by its structured and cohesive nature, and utopia as a “drive,” intended as an impulse towards a desirable future, which is not connected to a concrete and/or systematic realization. Utopian elements are present since the beginning of the novel, with the cooperative appearing to be a healthy and democratic social structure, and its material innovations being highly adapted to the aridity of the climate. These aspects of the novel are close to what characterizes utopia as a literary genre, whereas the sun cream and the new human-plant relationship it enables are more closely related to the utopian “drive.”

This social organization is however threatened by the further deterioration of the climate, and by the increasingly widespread desire among citizens to join the ongoing exodus towards the North. The story will ultimately be about the new ways they will find to adapt and finally fully realize the utopia of a human population living in harmony with their environment, despite climate change. Thus, the novel blends elements of utopia with others belonging to climate fiction, a term coined in 2007 that indicates “a new genre of fiction and film, reflecting but also to a degree informing views and shaping conversations on climate change” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 1).

This positive approach to climate change, rather rare within the field of anticipation literature, is linked to the subgenre to which the novel belongs, as is explicitly claimed on its back cover: solarpunk. The term refers to a recent artistic and political movement, as well as a related science fiction subgenre, whose first expressions date back to 2008.⁵ The 2019 “Solarpunk Manifesto” summarizes the movement’s objectives, after acknowledging that “The genre is not yet clearly defined”: “Solarpunk is a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question ‘what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?’”⁶

As Cesaretti points out, “solarpunk has still to fully flourish [...] within the fields of ecofiction and/or ecological science fiction both in English and, even more, in Italian” (Cesaretti 215). That said, *I Vegumani* is part of what could be considered a boom period for Italian literary solarpunk, which began in 2020 with the publication of the first Italian solarpunk anthology, *Assalto al sole*.

The utopian drive that we identified at the core of the novel is inherent to the very definition of solarpunk. The novel presents an optimistic vision of the path

⁵ The term “solarpunk” was coined in a blog article written by an anonymous author, entitled “From Steampunk to Solarpunk.” While a strong affinity with the steampunk subgenre is made explicit by the second part of the term, the first part, “solar,” refers both to the sun as a renewable source of energy and to an optimistic, proactive vision of the future.

⁶ The Solarpunk Manifesto, whose collective author is claimed to be “the Solarpunk community,” can be read at this link: <https://www.re-des.org/es/a-solarpunk-manifesto/>. The quoted sentence was first written in an introduction to the extensive Internet page titled “Solarpunk: A Reference Guide,” accessible at the following link: <https://medium.com/solarpunks/solarpunk-a-reference-guide-8bcf18871965>.

humanity might follow in the future, when the consequences of climate change have reached extreme levels and adaptation to a new, harsher reality becomes the only option. Farris's version of solarpunk can be seen as an original blend of a nostalgic idealization of a "golden age," in which human beings would have lived in harmony with nature, and scientific and technological components inspired by her familiarity with science fictional approaches to the future. Ultimately, it is possible to speak of a 'utopia in progress': not a closed, perfected social system, but one that is rapidly evolving towards perfection.

In short, both novels address urgent issues related to ecology, understood as humankind's relationship with its environment and the other, nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth, including plants. However, while the first adopts a classic science fiction structure and scope, displaying dramatic stakes that directly affect all of humanity and end in a collective tragedy, the second prefers a 'local' approach and the optimistic vision of solarpunk.

Hybrid Futures: From Nonhuman Encounters to Human Metamorphosis

The two novels under analysis articulate contrasting approaches to the question of human relationships with nonhuman others, a theme widely debated in contemporary philosophy and literary fiction. As the following paragraphs will show, the way humans relate to their "exterior" natural alterities—animals, plants, the planet—may have profound implications for their own identity and aspiration to, or fear of, transformation. This section therefore examines both the representation of nonhuman life in the two novels and the motif of hybridization, understood as the passage from an external relation with other beings to an internal metamorphosis of the human itself.

Human Relationships with Nonhuman Others

At first glance, the two protagonists begin their stories with a well-developed personal and professional relationship to the natural, nonhuman environment. One—the military John Smith—is originally a "bioambientalist" who specializes in "bioevolution and advanced genetic bioengineering" (Conforti 30), while the other, who chose her own name out of a flower, lives and works in an agricultural cooperative.

Remarkably, and even though nonhuman animals are not entirely absent from either novel, they remain largely secondary. In *Carnivori*, the question of meat-eating is nevertheless central to the narrative, as it is framed within the fanatical logic of the "Ethical": the project's radical approach seeks not only to solve ethical or ecological

issues related to animal consumption, but also to extend the principle of non-harm to the point of eventually encompassing all living beings.⁷

The most important category for a comprehensive reading of these novels is the vegetal kingdom. The main characters of both novels share a personal knowledge of and love for their natural environment, particularly plants. In *Carnivori*, this knowledge is evident in an early passage where the description of a landscape is punctuated with the scientific names of the trees present, demonstrating John's familiarity with the plant kingdom: "*Pinus pinea* and *Pinus pianster* dominating over a sea of *Quercus ilex*, with a few scattered *Pinus sylvestris*" (32).⁸ The same rhetorical device is used in *I vegumani*: throughout the novel, we follow Gazania's point of view (although, unlike Conforti, Farris opted for a third-person narration), which entails the recognition of a large number of plants, named either by their common or scientific names, or sometimes both.

However, the two novels differ greatly in terms of the narrative presence of plants, both in quantity and quality. While the quoted passage in Conforti does not prefigure the rest of the novel, which is almost devoid of concrete allusions to plants, the opposite is true in Farris's novel, to the point that this text has been described as "a whole love novel for the plant kingdom" ("un intero romanzo d'amore per il regno vegetale," De Paolo). Gazania does not only know plants as scientific or aesthetic objects; she actually *lives with them*, as fellow members of the cooperative, and sees them as alterities that deserve love and care. The other characters—especially the children—also have strong feelings towards what they consider their fellow plants, which are referred to with many terms associated with the idea of kinship: "amici" ("friends"), "sorelle del deserto" ("sisters of the desert" 85), "fratelli e sorelle vegetali" ("vegetal brothers and sisters" 147), and so on.

Moreover, plants are seen as individuals with unique personalities, as is the case with a huge hybrid plant with which Gazania has formed a bond of friendship, and to which she has given a name, Aster. This "Rose of the Desert" plays a recurring role in the story, through the evolutions of Gazania's relationship to it: it offers her a refuge from the external hardships, but also rejects her when she harbours negative feelings. Above all, Aster helps her understand how plants live, and how the hybridization of human beings with plants induced by the sun cream could lead them to live a more harmonious and peaceful existence. In other words, the main character shares a deep, multifaceted bond with this vegetal entity, rooted in a sense of kinship, which is acknowledged since its first appearance in the narrative: "The girl felt as though she were Aster's daughter and sister, as if she had grown from one of their shoots" (23).⁹

⁷ A detailed analysis of the question of meat-eating in *Carnivori* would merit a separate study, in dialogue with the growing field of "meat critique;" see, for instance, McCorry and Miller (esp. the introduction).

⁸ "*Pinus pinea* e *Pinus pianster* che dominano su una marea di *Quercus ilex*, e poi qualche sparuto *Pinus sylvestris*."

⁹ "La ragazza si sentiva figlia e sorella di Aster, come se fosse scaturita da un suo pollone."

This is what makes *I vegumani*'s narrative construction original: plants are not just landscape features—they are actual characters, who play a central role in the lives and concerns of the human protagonists. This narrative choice may have been influenced by the publication, in recent years, of scientific and philosophical books that have revealed to the public the unsuspected complexity of plants' lives, their adaptative strategies, and their communication.¹⁰ The novel is indeed informed by biological data on the plant kingdom, but this scientific dimension is merely a backdrop against which the author's poetic imagination can offer a fictional glimpse into how plants might perceive and comprehend the world. In this sense, Farris's novel aligns with the critical trend that Iovino refers to as "Literature of Liberation," whereby many literary works actively contribute to "liberating" nonhuman beings—not only animals, but also plants and inorganic objects—from their "silence," attempting to "overcome the boundaries of subjectivity" and "emancipate storytelling from the standpoint of the individual ego" (Iovino 2018, 233). Whether intentionally or not, Farris thus follows an Italian literary tradition that, going from Leopardi to Calvino and Primo Levi (in many of his short stories), challenges the anthropocentric view of the world that has long been dominant in Western culture and literature.

However, Farris does not directly depict the point of view of any plant; instead, she centres her story on human beings whose already existing special proximity with the vegetal kingdom is further accentuated and explored through the means of a partial and involuntary 'becoming-plant,' which plays an important role at both individual and collective levels.

The acceptance of hybridization as a solution, not only to climatic hardships, but also to the broader issue of what a healthy and harmonious existence should be, is at the core of the novel's post-anthropocentric scope. This is particularly evident if we examine the vision of plants conveyed by the speeches and thoughts of the human characters: what emerges is, overall, such a profound admiration for them that plants end up being seen as a model to follow. This vision can be connected to a recent, flourishing theoretical trend which invites us to 'learn' from the plants, in order for human beings to live better lives (Hall; Marder; Mancuso; Tassin; Wohlleben).

This representation of plants reveals an unexpected common characteristic of the two novels: despite their contrasting ideological stances on human/nonhuman relationships, both novels engage in a similar ontological flattening of the differences between living kingdoms, particularly between animal and plant life. In one case, this makes vegetarianism seem irrelevant, while in the other, it gives plants increased ontological value, as they are shown to be capable of suffering like animals.

In several passages, we can speak of a genuine idealization, the formulation of which—following the tendency for the human mind to only think of the nonhuman

¹⁰ See especially Mancuso 2019. This hypothesis is not supported by any interviews with the author: rather, it lies upon the thematic and semantic proximity of Farris's novel with this trend in scientific literature.

through the prism of anthropomorphism¹¹—involves the rhetorical device of personification: “Tomatoes hold hands like little sisters, thought Gazania. [...] Ah, if human beings were like tomatoes!” (28).¹² The superiority of tomatoes over humans—one of the many manifestations of an axiological reversal at work in the novel, where plants are generally considered to be wiser and more resilient than human beings—is expressed through their humanization and the desire for human beings to follow them as a life model. This passage subtly anticipates the transformation of human characters into half-plant beings, and the new wisdom this experience will allow them to access.

All of this brings us to examine the descriptions of the hybridizing processes and their outcomes in the two novels, which share some common points but diverge in the positive or negative view that is taken of them.

Hybridization and Identity, between Loss and Enhancement

It is worth clarifying what I mean by the term “hybridization”, which is central to my interpretation of *Carnivori* and *I vegumani*. Let us start with the literal definition: “the process of producing a plant or animal from two different types of plant or animal” (Cambridge Dictionary). In our case, however, I believe it is important to consider hybridization in a broader sense, specific to science fiction imagination, wherein the phenomenon is not limited to species belonging to the same living kingdom. After all, many authors have imagined ‘hybridization’ between human and machine.

Another objection to using the term in our case could be that, in *Carnivori*, human beings are profoundly modified, but there is no explicit mention of any real crossing with another species or kingdom. Nevertheless, the biological basis of the notion is relevant in both cases, insofar as the process occurs through a modification of human DNA. I will therefore continue to use the term, as it best approximates the original transformations extrapolated by the two authors and raises interesting questions relating to the important issue of identity.

In my reading, the notion of hybridization carries markedly different implications in the two novels. In *Carnivori*, it is portrayed as a threat to human identity, a process whose costs—loss of reason, social bonds, and ultimately life itself—far outweigh its intended benefits; I therefore interpret it as largely a negative and dangerous transformation. This is illustrated by a dialogue between the narrator and her friend, whose wife and daughter are said to “have lost humanity” (“hanno perso l’umanità,” 196). In contrast, in *I vegumani*, it is depicted positively, enriching human capacities and fostering a harmonious relationship with the nonhuman world,

¹¹ For interesting considerations on the possible anti-anthropocentric uses of anthropomorphism in literature, see Clark. For a critical stance on the aforementioned theoretical trend, and its tendency to flatten the differences between different species and living kingdoms, as well as the inappropriateness of uncritically applying ‘zoomorphism’ to plants, see Burgat.

¹² “I pomodori si tengono per mano come tante sorelline, pensava Gazania. [...] Ah, se anche gli esseri umani fossero stati come pomodori!”

without undermining the positive attributes of human life. At the end of the novel, the main character observes with a sense of relief: "humanity still behaved according to its old habits" (135).¹³

Let us now examine how the process and consequences of hybridization are concretely represented in the novels. One obvious common point is the fact that hybridized human beings are able to draw their energy and nutrients from the sun's rays, either partially (*I vegumani*) or completely (*Carnivori*). Such a vision might appear as utopian at first, as it seems to solve some of the major issues facing humanity, both in our own time and in the futures imagined by the authors. These issues are only partly shared by the two novels: while Conforti focuses on the issue of how to feed all humans *without* harming other living beings, Farris treats the food issue just one of the many difficulties arising from climate change. Therefore, it is logical that her version of the same transformation should have other positive effects. For instance, her 'vegumani' need much less water to survive and can withstand the unbearable heat of the sun's rays, especially at certain times of the day, which has become impossible for 'normal' human beings.

This representation echoes Micali's theorization of the "nonhuman," according to which the hybrids, zombies, cyborgs, and monsters of all kinds "can be regarded as means of inquiry into the nature, position and destiny of humankind in the world" (Micali 20). From this standpoint, hybridization is neither positive nor negative in itself, and the two novels under analysis illustrate how a text's perspective can determine the value accorded to this phenomenon. *I vegumani* falls into a particular subcategory of science fiction, exemplified by Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, in which hybridizing humankind with another species is presented as its best chance to mitigate the unhealthy and destructive tendencies of human nature and thus survive the world's transformations (Micali 110–113 and 212–214).

Another interesting and shared element is the addictive potential of the experience of feeding on sunlight. This dangerous side effect, which might compromise the entire experiment, is visible from the first pages of *I vegumani*, when Gazania's friend, Asfodelo, is said to be "sun-drunk as a reptile" (18)¹⁴. In *Carnivori*, the narrator and protagonist discovers it only after receiving her own injection of the hybridizing substance, around the middle of the story (100–105).

Still, at some point, both Gazania and John Smith experience a similar pleasure of unprecedented depth (Farris 41; Conforti 102). Both scenes show the discovery of an intimate new relationship with the sun, whose light provides pleasure, renewed vitality and positive emotions. The phenomenon appears as profound but moderated in Farris: "As she walked, Gazania felt that exposure to the sun invigorated her [...]; the warm air instilled a calmness that started in her chest and spread in every direction" (41).¹⁵

¹³ "L'umanità si comportava ancora secondo le vecchie abitudini."

¹⁴ "[U]briaco di sole come un rettile."

¹⁵ "Mentre si incamminava, Gazania aveva l'impressione che l'esposizione al Sole la rinvigorisse [...]; l'aria calda le infondeva una calma che partiva dal petto e si espandeva in ogni direzione."

On the contrary, Conforti uses the hyperbolic term “ecstasis”, and makes it clear immediately afterwards that this experience entails the risk of a loss of control, along with disturbing side-effects: “It is a strong, burning, violent desire that I must repress, not a passive repulsion like that of the mulk. [...] Something is wrong. [...] I am mentally unstable and I have to keep that in mind before I act” (104–105).¹⁶

From this point onwards, the vision of hybridization conveyed by the story becomes increasingly disturbing, as the benefits of the process appear to be far outweighed by the costs. Even the supposedly good intentions of those responsible for the plan are being called into question, when John discovers a whole host of human subjects who have been used as involuntary guinea pigs. After their bodies have had adverse reactions to the injection, these human beings, now reduced to the status of “rejections” (“rigetti”), are locked up and deprived of all rights (138–146). Stana Hannson’s stated desire to work for the good of humanity appears to mask a fanatical spirit that is willing to disregard all respect for human dignity to achieve her ends.

Conversely, Gazania and most of her compatriots remain committed to pursuing the common good. Even the “Grandma,” who generally comes across as unfriendly and cynical, is eventually revealed to be at the origin of the sun cream’s hybridizing power, and thus to have saved her whole community from exile. Relatedly, the individual and collective perception of hybridization follows the opposite trajectory to that observed in *Carnivori*: while Gazania is initially concerned about its mysterious functioning and consequences, she ultimately sees it as an unexpected solution to all the problems threatening the community’s survival¹⁷. Finally, one might argue that Farris depicts a ‘successful’ hybridization because it does not rob people of their human characteristics, but rather combines them harmoniously with features taken from plants. Consequently, it creates beings who can draw on the strengths of both categories, as a character sums up: “See the plants? Two drops of water and they’re green. They’re more capable of living than we are. But we have ingenuity. You have it and use it well. That’s how we will make it” (Farris 46).¹⁸ Moreover, this transformation is not forced upon the population; it is made available to anyone who wishes to experience it and is the result of a personal choice. Conforti’s version of hybridization, on the other hand, is perceived as an imposed and inescapable metamorphosis towards monstrosity. It entails the loss of everything that traditionally defines a human being—namely, self-consciousness, language, and the capacity to reason. In this sense, another subgenre of science fiction to which *Carnivori* can be related is the zombie story: the hosts of transformed creatures that inhabit the planet at the end look like undead people, in that they retain something of

¹⁶ “È un desiderio forte e bruciante, violento, quello che devo reprimere, non una repulsione passiva come quella del mulk. [...] Qualcosa non va. [...] Sono mentalmente instabile e devo tenerlo presente prima di agire.”

¹⁷ This providential nature was anticipated when, early in the novel, Gazania hyperbolically wondered if the cream might be “the solution to all their problems” (“la soluzione a tutti i loro problem,” 50).

¹⁸ “Vedi le piante? Due gocce d’acqua e sono verdi. Sono più capaci di noi a vivere. Però noi abbiamo l’ingegno. Tu ce l’hai et lo usi bene. È così che ce la faremo’.”

their previous appearance but have lost all memory of their human existence and now act on pure instinct.

The final difference between the two representations of hybridity is that only Farris's *vegumani* grow roots (provided they keep their feet bare), which are among the most remarkable physiological particularities of plants and the medium through which they relate to the earth. In the next section, I will discuss some of the implications of this detail in terms of the ideological and existential connotations attributed to the transformation.

Overcoming vs Reaffirming Anthropocentrism

In this final section, I will demonstrate how the contrasting representations of nonhuman life and hybridity in the two novels reflect divergent assumptions about the status of human beings in relation to the rest of the living world.

As was shown above, the human characters' partial plant transformation in *I vegumani* is viewed as an enhancement of their physical abilities and their understanding of the nonhuman world (versus a loss of humanity). This allows them not only to better withstand the sun and scarcity of food, but also to develop a deeper relationship with the world they live in and its other inhabitants. This is what Gazania recognizes when she acknowledges, late in the novel, that her sun cream "ha[s] led her to develop a profound sensitivity to vegetal life" (131–132).¹⁹

In this sense, *I vegumani* can be read as a literary realization of the post-anthropocentric ethical and political rethinking of the notion of community that many ecofeminist and posthumanist thinkers are calling for. The notion of posthumanism I refer to is a "post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic approach" (Ferrando 27), primarily represented by English-speaking thinkers (Braidotti; Wolfe), but has also gained ground in Italy (Ferrando; Marchesini) and is now often used as a theoretical reference framework within Italian Ecocriticism. The main common ground between these thinkers is their deconstruction of the anthropocentric worldview inherited from Western humanism. This deconstruction leads to various redefinitions of human identity, particularly in light of the concept of hybridity—the idea that human beings are intrinsically and profoundly hybridized with their natural and technological others. Alongside this ontological re-foundation, posthumanism also advocates the development of a new ethics that takes into account human kinship and interdependency with other living beings and with their natural environment, including plants.²⁰

The human/nonhuman boundary on which the whole humanist tradition has been built is called into question in Farris's novel, all the more radically since the beings that are now included as fellow citizens in the community are not only animals,

¹⁹ "L'AmicaSole le [ha] fatto sviluppare una sensibilità profonda alla vita vegetale."

²⁰ See for instance the notion of "zoo-egalitarianism" coined by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*, or the call for a post-capitalist, more inclusive sense of community in the last pages of Val Plumwood's foundational ecofeminist essay *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

but also plants—living beings that have long been considered the most alien to human subjectivity and mode of being in the world.

Gazania and her friends also overcome anthropocentrism in another sense: they learn many things from the plants, acknowledging their above-mentioned 'superiority' in certain aspects of their being in the world. Firstly, the (removable) roots that the AmicaSole grows under people's feet when they walk barefoot allow them to experience what it means to be truly rooted in the earth—an overwhelming sense of belonging and interdependence. This idea is summed up on the last page by the expression "communion with Creation" ("comunione col creato," 148).

The last aspect of *I vegumani*'s post-anthropocentric perspective that I would like to discuss is the question of human evolution. The humanist tradition views *homo sapiens* as the perfect culmination of an evolutionary journey that sets it apart from and above all other living species (see, for instance, Braidotti and Marchesini). Different contemporary trends of thought, however, consider that human evolution has not necessarily reached its final point, or even that it is infinite by essence. Posthumanist thinking, in particular, calls into question the adequacy of the unbridgeable ontological boundary erected by humanism between humanity and all other beings. This boundary is explicitly at stake in Farris's novel, through the hesitation between, on one hand, fearing a transformative process whose consequences are not yet fully understood, and on the other, accepting the fact that human nature is inherently changeable and never definitively fixed.²¹ The entire text draws on this philosophical thesis, the fictitious realization of which is permitted by its inscription in science fiction conventions and scientific extrapolation about the possibility of genetic hybridization with nonhuman species. Towards the end, the "Grandma" delivers a speech that highlights the incompatibility between traditional humanistic assumptions about the fixed and inviolable nature of human identity and the necessity for literal and conceptual evolution, both in response to the ecological crisis: "We had to adapt, there was no other solution. But they were afraid. Touching the DNA, violating the sacred boundary! Imbeciles. As if DNA doesn't modify itself with every mitosis" (Farris 115).²²

On the other hand, the global vision that emerges from *Carnivori* is much closer to reaffirming humanist positions. Although post-anthropocentric echoes are not absent, they remain mostly confined to the discourses of people who, despite their apparently 'ethical' ideology, are eventually characterized as fanatics. Indeed, their desire to improve the world causes the painful annihilation of countless individual beings and species. Interestingly, the metaphorical expression 'salto evolutivo' appears in both novels (Farris 110 and Conforti 195). In one case, it is integrated into the narrative to express the main character's thoughts; in the other, it is used by an

²¹ This aspect of the novel aligns with posthumanist views of human identity as inherently hybrid (Marchesini; Wolfe), as well as with Coccia's conception of metamorphosis and hybridization as the essence of life itself—so much so that, according to him, "Every Living Being Is a Chimera" (Coccia 55).

²² "Dovevamo adattarci, non c'era altra soluzione. Ma loro avevano paura. Toccare il DNA, violare il sacro confine! Imbecilli. Come se il DNA non si modificasse da solo a ogni mitosi."

'ethical' spokesperson who is perceived as fanatical. This detail alone is indicative of the two novels' divergent perspectives on the same central theme, which is pivotal to the extrapolation in the science fiction genre.

At the same time, some aspects of Conforti's book suggest a vision of humanity as part of a vast ecosystem, whose destruction is terrible *in itself*. As mentioned previously, the main character, John Smith, has a deep love for her world, expressed, for instance, in the following words: "This world is so beautiful" (115).²³ The choice of the adjective "beautiful" reveals a kind of affection I would define as more aesthetic than organic. This interpretation is confirmed by another line attributed to the same character: "I just love the landscape more than the people"²⁴. Using the term "landscape"—instead of 'world,' 'environment' or 'ecosystem'—is a revealing semantic choice, which alludes to a relationship with the world based on visual enjoyment rather than on affective connections, mutual exchanges, or interdependence. This detail, along with the whole story, conveys the impression of a less intimate relationship between human beings and their habitat than that imagined by Farris.

Ultimately, *Carnivori* is not a novel that can be interpreted univocally. Its ideological stance involves complex questioning, evident in John's hesitation between two worldviews and her partial adherence to the 'ethical' perspective until a late stage in the story. Yet, it unfolds a human-centred narrative and conveys a conception of hybridization as a threat for human identity, rather than as a healthy adaptation to new living conditions. The idea of a positive but extremely remote future evolution is only briefly evoked in a dialogue between John and her friend Marcus: "According to Enebra, sunmen will make at least six generations in a hundred years, sixty in a thousand. They may express significant functional changes" (200).²⁵ This passage suggests that human evolution may not be definitively achieved, but that it is necessary to allow it to run its natural course, rather than forcing humanity to take a brutal evolutionary leap.

Evolution is thus a central theme in both novels, but it is intended in a more conservative sense in *Carnivori*, whereas Farris embraces a posthuman, revolutionary interpretation of the concept. Similarly, both books feature characters who love the natural world deeply, but only in *I vegumani* does this love take the form of concrete, mutual relationships with nonhuman others.

Conclusion

This reading has demonstrated how *I vegumani's* and *Carnivori's* stories, starting from a common narrative premise—the hybridization of humans and

²³ "Questo mondo è bellissimo."

²⁴ "È che io amo più il paesaggio della gente."

²⁵ "Secondo Enebra i *sunmen* faranno almeno sei generazioni in cent'anni, sessanta in mille. Potrebbero esprimere delle modificazioni funzionali significative."

plants—lead to divergent, even opposite, ideological outcomes. While *I vegumani* envisions a post-anthropocentric humanity, integrated within a network of interdependence and open to evolutionary transformation, *Carnivori* reaffirms a more traditional, humanist conception of human identity, seen as something that must be preserved from contamination with natural others.

These contrasting perspectives suggest that the figure of the human-plant hybrid in speculative fiction is not inherently subversive: it can either dismantle or reinforce the boundaries of human exceptionalism. Yet, when employed to question those boundaries, it becomes a powerful tool for reconsidering humanity's place within the living world—a reflection that may prove vital for our collective future.

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